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Satellites For Peace: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

By William Greider

AS THE arms-control strategy known as SALT gradually slides toward collapse this autumn, important statesmen begin to resemble priests of a dying religion. They repeat all of the right prayers but the liturgy no longer seems convincing.

Some of us who were agnostics all along thought it would take at least a decade to reach this point when neither left nor right, hawks nor doves, can still look reverently upon this treaty-making process. Hawks think SALT leaves us weak and vulnerable. Doves are beginning to understand that SALT propels the arms race as much as it harnesses it. Any grand strategy which can be easily routed by a light cavalry brigade — those Russians in Cuba with their 40 tanks — must not be so grand.

This perception, I think, is now widely shared in Washington regardless of whether SALT II eventually does get ratified. The theory of serial superpower treaties with the Russians is a lot less

promising than Nixon and Kissinger, Ford and Carter led us to suppose. The high priests of diplomacy will be traumatized by this, but the rest of us may see an opportunity in disaster — a chance to think new thoughts which fit world realities better than SALT.

Sen. Adlai Stevenson of Illinois, who is so serious about his work that newspapers usually describe him as dull, has the germ of an historic idea — a concept of international relations that actually looks forward and tries to address the interdependent world of the future, instead of the superpower past. The idea is simple enough, but it requires a fresh perspective to grasp its full potential. So, naturally, very few in Washington are ready to take it seriously.

"The SALT process is inadequate," the senator was saying the other day. "It may be collapsing of its own weight. It can't control weapons systems faster than technology can develop them."

Stevenson wants to build another international structure alongside the Soviet-U.S. arms negotiations — a global information system, shared and operated cooperatively by all nations. It would use space satellites and the technological wizardry of modern intelligence agencies for peace-keeping as well as to aid human endeavors, from agriculture to mineral exploration.

The senator is uniquely positioned to see the potential, for he is chairman of the Senate Space Committee, overseer of NASA's plans for the 1980s, and also chairman of the intelligence subcommittee which keeps tabs on the CIA and other clandestine agencies. These NASA space satellites have become ho-hum to most citizens, just as NASA became a public bore after the moon landings, but a new generation of devices can now do extraordinary things in monitoring the surfaces of earth — from identifying crop blights and impending drought to locating the most promising target ground for oil drilling, for mineral extraction, for human development of many kinds.

Coupled with the CIA's sophistication in photo-reconnaisance analysis, this new era of space could produce stunningly direct benefits for everyone, rich and poor, big and small.

As the Bible tells us, mankind will go on making war of one kind or another until the last millennium and space satellites aren't going to change that. But a shared intelligence system does offer another means of early-warning alarms when one country starts massing troops on a border or a superpower opens a new submarine base or a nation's industrial capacity is shifted in a menacing direction. It would not make pacifists out of rogues — but it would pin down the rogues in the international forums with hard evidence.

Stevenson is offering his own version of an idea which has been pushed for years by a dogged team of peace seekers, Howard Kurtz and his late wife Harriet, who incorporated themselves as global thinkers under the arresting title of War Control Planners. Mostly they are ignored. But those skeptics who threw away the Kurtzes' material on a "global information cooperative" might want to fish it out of the wastebasket now that a mainstream figure like Adlai Stevenson has picked up the concept.

"It's not theoretical," Stevenson said. "It's so concrete I can't talk about it."

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Anyone who understands how the world has changed in the last 20 years, the complicated and fragile interdependence of trading nations and supranational corporations, can